

The Interaction of the Nigerian Indigenous Culture  
and the Christian Missionaries:  
Polygamy as a Case Study

A Professional Project  
Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont  
In Partial Fulfillment for  
The Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

By  
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*This professional project, completed by*

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*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

*Faculty Committee*

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April 2, 1986  
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Joseph A. Hough  
Dean

To my wife

Dorcas Oluwawemimo Lawal (nee Ajala)

whose sacrificial labor and relentless encouragement made my  
D.Min. studies possible.

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## ABSTRACT

The Interaction of the Nigerian Indigenous Culture  
and the Christian Missionaries: Polygamy as a Case Study

By  
Abayomi Enitan Lawal

This project is intended to bring a solution to the rejection of polygamist converts by the Nigerian missionary churches, due to their presupposition that monogamy is the Christian ideal form of marriage. The Nigerian missionary churches have, therefore, made divorce for polygamist converts the requirement for baptism, church membership and eucharist.

The topic for this project is limited to Nigeria only for more specification, though a similar problem exists in many countries in Africa. Therefore, this project may be beneficial to other African countries where polygamy has created tensions in the church.

In trying to find a solution to the negative attitude of the Nigerian missionary churches toward polygamy, I have examined the historical background of the mission work in Nigeria, which includes the reaction of the missionaries after forcing their Western cultural norm for marriage on the Nigerian people. I have also, in a general fashion, tried to show what the Bible says about polygamy and God's attitude towards polygamists as described in the Scriptures. The anthropological discussion is to show that polygamy has a long tradition in Nigeria, and exists among the Nigerian people for reasons other than sexual satisfaction, low status of women and the like.



This project has shown that there is no biblical justification for refusing to admit polygamist converts into the full membership of the church. The Nigerian missionary churches must view polygamous marriage among the Nigerians as a valid, legitimate form of marriage. Likewise, they must view monogamous marriage requirement for all polygamous converts as a transmission of Western cultural norm into the Nigerian culture. This means that cultural change has been made a prerequisite for baptism, church membership and participation in the eucharist. The Nigerian churches should accept polygamists into full church membership and slowly, but uncoercively, move them toward monogamy.

## PREFACE

If there were any way for me to be milder in my harsh criticism of the missionary decision on polygamists I would have done so. Africans are indebted to the Western missionaries who gave themselves sacrificially for Jesus Christ, and any deliberate attempt to downgrade their efforts because of faults in the mission principles and ideal should be considered as unchristian.

I believe that the missionaries had a noble reason for acting against the practice of polygamy in Africa, though today we may have genuine reasons for criticizing their intentions. The missionaries wanted to lay the best foundation known to them for Christianity in Africa. The foundation was to be free of compromise and anything less than the Christian ideal of marriage which is known to be monogamous. It is unfortunate that today their best has proven not to be good enough, especially on the issue of polygamy.

My highest regards go to anyone who has been engaged in any type of mission work in any part of the world, especially on the continent of Africa. May the peace of God that passes all human comprehension rest upon all the missionaries, in spite of the many criticisms heaped upon them for their mistake. Amen.

## INTRODUCTION

### Problem Addressed by the Project

The problem is the attitude of the Nigerian missionary churches toward polygamous converts which makes cultural change a requirement for baptism, church membership, and eucharist.

### Importance of the Problem

Pastors and other ministers in Nigerian missionary churches have been blamed for evangelizing polygamous people without really studying the social-cultural tradition of polygamy. In the past, emphasis has been placed upon logical inferences drawn from abstract ethical norms and from ethnocentric interpretations of supporting biblical texts. For example, Genesis 2:21-25 has been interpreted as God's intention to make monogamy the ideal form of marriage by creating only one woman for Adam. Now an understanding of why polygamy is practiced in Nigeria is needed. The historico-cultural aspect of the Nigerian people must be brought into focus.

Since the age of dogmatism is gone, the Western missionary effort in Nigeria has been challenged by some Nigerian christians. Many Nigerian Christians have come to the conclusion that the Western world is also guilty of polygamy. The type of polygamy that is practiced among Western people is called "consecutive polygamy." That is, one spouse after another in a sequence involving divorce and remarriage. The common type of polygamy in Nigeria is "simultaneous polygamy," that is, more than one

spouse at a time.<sup>1</sup>

It is also believed by some Nigerians that the divorce alternative given to the polygamous converts by the church is worse than polygamy itself. To support the above argument, as shall be discussed in chapter two of this paper, it is seen that the Bible passages such as Matthew 19:1-9 speak against divorce directly, while they do not condemn polygamy directly. In fact, the people of God in Old Testament times practiced polygamy, while some of their contemporary unchosen nations did not.<sup>2</sup> God chose such men as Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon and others as His favorite people, despite their polygamous life style. Some scholars like Geoffrey Parrinder have concluded that God permitted polygamy in former times, but that polygamy is gradually shifting towards monogamy.<sup>3</sup> This is ambiguous, since there is no biblical support for this claim except by inference.

From personal encounter with many Nigerians I have observed that at least one out of every five persons witnessed to by the Nigerian missionary church is either a polygamist or from a polygamous home. Thus far, the procedure used by the church is to witness to such people on their need to accept Christ as their Savior and Lord. It is after their conversion that the church tells them, in a mandatory way, to divorce

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered (New York: Orbis, 1975) 10f.

<sup>2</sup>Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 115.

<sup>3</sup>Geoffrey Parrinder, The Bible and Polygamy (London: S.P.C.K., 1950) 40.

their wives (or their husbands in the case of the women converts in polygamous marriages). Many of these polygamous converts are left to face the dilemma of choosing between two alternatives: 1) Divorce other wives and cling to only one or divorce all and marry a new wife or 2) Keep your polygamous marriage and be denied baptism, church membership, and eucharist. Due to these demands, some polygamous converts have either become members of the indigenous charismatic churches who condone polygamy, or, if they are determined to follow Christ against all odds, they have become "Christians" within the missionary churches, but without church membership. In short, it takes more than faith in Christ for polygamists to become Christians in Nigeria, due to the divorce requirement that must be met by the polygamists before the church will consider them as part of the body of Christ.

I am not trying to project polygamy as a "normal" way of life for the Nigerian people. Having been born into a polygamous home, I have a firsthand knowledge of the values and structures of a polygamous marriage. However, since good and evil are relative terms, what are advantages or disadvantages of polygamy for me may not be true in all polygamous marriages. Thus, one may have to look at some statistical data, both in the biblical and contemporary writings, to determine the successes and failures of polygamous marriages.

### Thesis

The thesis of my project is that polygamists must be fully accepted as members in the Nigerian missionary churches on the basis of faith in

Christ alone. Thus, the Nigerian churches should not mandate divorce as a requirement for accepting polygamists into the full membership of the church.

### Definition of Terms

In this project I will be referring to terms such as: "polygamy" and "polygamous" marriages, "charismatic traditional churches," "missionary churches," "court," and "custom."

Polygamy and polygamous marriages refer to polygyny, which means a man who has more than one wife at a time. It does not refer to polyandry, since it is not legally or socially recognized for a woman to have more than one legal husband at a time. Polygyny is socially recognized.

The missionary churches are churches founded by missionary endeavor, but might have become independent of the missionaries. They form denominations that are common all over the world: Methodists, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, and the like.

By the term "custom," I am referring to what the society in general accepts as the norm. Custom and tradition may be used interchangeably.

"Court" refers to Customary or Magistrate Court where legal documents for marriages are obtained.

### Limitations of the Scope

My interest in this project is not to condemn, or recommend, or condone polygamy. I wish to find a meeting point between the missionary

churches that emphatically condemn polygamy and the pagan and Muslim believers who practice polygamy, but later become Christian. My basic argument is that polygamous converts should be admitted into the full membership of the church, without any condition to divorce any of the former wives before or after such admission.

#### Work Previously Done in the Field

Musa Gotom, in his Ph.D. dissertation, mentioned briefly the need to know how to counsel with a polygamous family. As a Nigerian who comes from a predominantly polygamous culture, Gotom was aware of the problems that are peculiar to polygamous families. Thus he suggested an approach of counselling with polygamists that was different from the stereotypical monogamous way.<sup>4</sup>

Lawrence Taryor's approach to the problem of polygamy and the church in Africa is to attack the missionary movement which, rather than preaching the gospel of Christ alone, became ethnocentric by injecting their own culture into the gospel message as the criteria for membership. Taryor believes that African churches must be left alone to practice their own cultural heritage, be it polygamy or its taboos. He concluded that without the church in Africa being completely Africanized, the missionary churches will continue to lose their members to other religions

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<sup>4</sup>Musa Dimka Gotom, "Towards an Indigenous Model for Pastoral Counselling and Care Based on Some Socio-cultural, Anthropological and Theological Presuppositions of Certain Nigerian People," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1975) 275-6.

or churches who embrace the African traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Among the published books written on polygamy, that of Eugene Hillman on Polygamy Reconsidered is worth mentioning. As a Western writer, he tried to understand the system of polygamy in Africa better than most writers who view polygamy only from a monogamous bias. He suggested that churches should hold monogamy as the ideal, but polygamous converts should be fully accepted in the church on the basis of faith alone, without any demand to divorce any wife or wives previously married.<sup>6</sup>

In The Ethics of Sex, Helmut Thielicke has some suggestions concerning the problem of polygamy and missionary work. Thielicke believes that monogamy is the ideal form of marriage. Though this cannot be substantiated by any direct quotations from the Bible, the principle of agape establishes monogamy as the only form of Christian marriage. He warned that the same principle of agape must guide the missionaries in an environment where polygamy is practiced, so that their reaction toward this unchristian marriage will be corrected, without jeopardizing their gospel message. His solution is to teach the Christian ideal after the polygamist has been fully accepted into the church. More importantly, during and after such teaching, the polygamist must not be forced to divorce his wives, but must be given the freedom to do what he knows will best suit

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<sup>5</sup>Lawrence Nya Kwiawon Taryor, "Impact of the African Tradition on Christianity in Africa Through the Independent Church Movement," (Unpublished D.Min. project, School of Theology at Claremont, 1976) 82-90.

<sup>6</sup>Eugene Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered (New York: Orbis, 1975).



his new way of life.<sup>7</sup>

Geoffrey Parrinder has written a number of books on the issue of polygamy and the Christian Church. In The Bible and Polygamy, Parrinder emphasized his belief that monogamy was the original plan of God for marriage, because He created one man (Adam) and one woman (Eve) in the Garden of Eden. He also contended that polygamy was practiced by the Hebrew people, due to their deviation from the Law of God. But Jesus brought monogamy back when He reminded them of God's original model for marriage.<sup>8</sup> Parrinder's viewpoint will be dealt with in chapter two under "Engagement of Biblical Passage on Polygamy."

In his book, Must We Introduce Monogamy?, Gunnar Helander, a missionary to South Africa, said that he was unhappy about the decision that a polygamous convert cannot be baptized unless he divorces all his former wives except the first. He argued that the West has no right to impose any code of principles or set up rules and regulations for Africa. When the Africans see polygamy as an economic problem, many will willingly abandon polygamy. Helander strongly disapproves of allowing a converted Christian to enter a polygamous marriage. If it happens, the Christian should be excommunicated from the church. Helander allowed an exception: a young Christian girl who is forced by her parents to marry a polygamist. To him, the girl should be excommunicated for ten years, but after she has

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<sup>7</sup> Helmut Thielick, The Ethics of Sex (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 178ff.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, The Bible and Polygamy (London: S.P.C.K., 1950)

been found faithful in her Christian living, she should be readmitted to full church membership without having to divorce her polygamous husband. Helander, Parrinder and many others believe that monogamy is the Christian ideal of marriage.<sup>9</sup>

A lay person, speaking from a different perspective on marriage, expresses his opinion that it is wrong for any African to be forced to marry only one wife, on the basis of religion. Akinola Aguda, a Barrister-at-Law, wrote in his book, The Marriage Laws of Nigeria, that the law relating to bigamy must be abolished in Nigeria, so that anybody (regardless of his religious affiliation) who wishes to enter into a polygamous life could do so willingly without committing any offense.<sup>10</sup>

There are many articles written on polygamy and the attitude of the missionary churches towards polygamist converts. One of the refutable writings was by Willard Burce on "Polygamy and the Church." Burce said that polygamy is a sin, since it is a transgression of God's plan for family life. I do not agree with this position, since it lacks any biblical support. Burce's work is mentioned because it shows the far extreme work of some writers who tried to defend monogamy as the God-given code for marriage.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Gunnar Helander, Must We Introduce Monogamy? (Pitermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1958)

<sup>10</sup>Ankinola Aguda, The Marriage Laws of Nigeria (Ibaden: University of Ife, 1966)

<sup>11</sup>Willard Burce, "Polygamy and the Church," Concordia Theological Monthly 34 (April 1963) 223f.

In contrast to Burce's opinion is the work of Edward G. Newing on "The Baptism of Polygamous Families: Theory and Practice in an East African Church." Newing is of the opinion that denial of baptism to a polygamous convert is a denial of the gospel. Such denial is equivalent to the shortsightedness of Judaisers of the first century Christians who wanted to make circumcision mandatory for every Gentile convert. Law, he said, must not be allowed to become a way of salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Harry Boer said that an unbiased study of the Bible will show that many passages used to argue against polygamy are mere speculations of what the passage truly teaches. Rather, they should be used to condemn divorce and not polygamy.<sup>13</sup>

Since experience is more valuable than theory, much value, then, are the books written by some former Mormons on their experiences with polygamy. No doubt there may be some exaggerations in their documentations, but care must be taken by anyone who cares to disprove or disagree with such experiences, because it may be based on mere presupposition.

Of great value are such books as Wife No. 19 by Ann Eliza Young, who was born into a polygamous home, married into a polygamous family and almost remarried into a polygamous family. She did not condemn polygamy from a biblical standpoint but from an ethical standpoint. Only a few of the ills of a polygamous system are adequately pointed out, since it is

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<sup>12</sup>Edward G. Newing, "The Baptism of Polygamous Families: Theory and Practice in an East African Church," Journal of Religion in Africa 3 (1970) 130f.

<sup>13</sup>Harry Boer, "Polygamy," Frontier 11 (Spring 1968) 24f.

not possible to relate all the disadvantages of polygamy. Ann Young came to hate polygamy so passionately that she prefers staying single to being a wife of a polygamist. Her book is the story of a life in bondage which reveals the sorrows, sacrifices, and sufferings of women in polygamy.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to Ann Eliza Young's "Wife No. 19" is the book by Kimball Young, Isn't One Wife Enough? Even though she disapproves of polygamy, she mentions some of the advantages of the system: the economic aspect, the sexual fulfillment and the prestige and power that are derived from it. Such advantages must not be minimized by any opposer of polygamy, because they are the driving force that lead some monogamists to become polygamists.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ann Eliza Young, Wife No. 19 (New York: Arno Press, 1972)

<sup>15</sup>Kimball Young, Isn't One Wife Enough? (New York: Holt, 1954)

## CHAPTER I

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Marriage in Nigeria

Eugene Hillman is right when he said that "every socio-cultural and religious institution has a history."<sup>1</sup> However, it is difficult to trace the history of marriage in Nigeria, since it took a while before the historical events of the country began to be put into written form. It is even difficult to know when the Nigerian soil was first inhabited, though archaeological findings (probably of Phoenician origin) have been found to prove the long existence of some of the kingdoms in Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> It was not until the early part of the nineteenth century that some events began to be recorded in the northern part of Nigeria, due to their contact with the Arabs. Therefore, we have to depend on oral myths and legends (no matter how distorted they might have been) for the early historical data.<sup>3</sup>

It must be assumed that polygamy, as an acceptable form of marriage, has been in existence among the Nigerian people even before they migrated onto the Nigerian soil. This assumption is based on the fact

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered (New York: Orbis, 1975) 17.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Burns, History of Nigeria (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963) 37.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Crowder, A Short History of Nigeria (New York: Praeger, 1966) 29.

that polygamy is embedded in the religion of the ancient people of Nigeria and has continued to the present generation. Though polygamy was widely practiced by the Nigerians, not all males could afford to be polygamist. In fact, poverty-stricken folks usually found it difficult to get a wife for themselves, much less their children. Thus polygamy was, to a greater extent, limited to the rich people who could afford to feed more mouths, clothe more bodies and shelter more people. Surely the adage is true that all animals are equal but some are more equal than the others.<sup>4</sup>

Nobody can disprove the fact that monogamy was more widely practiced than polygamy in ancient Nigeria. I am trying to focus our attention on the fact that polygamy (as few as the people who practiced the system might have been) did exist in Nigeria and was even envied by some less fortunate people. Factors other than poverty that made monogamy more popular were: first, the population of females was not significantly higher than that of males, and second, the marriageable age of both males and females was very low compared with the present time. For example, girls who were fourteen years old or less and boys of sixteen or seventeen years old were considered mature enough to start their own families, though they might still be fully dependent on their parents (especially the groom's parents) after their weddings.<sup>5</sup> The ages of the

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<sup>4</sup>Geoffrey Parrinder, Sex in the World's Religions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 140.

<sup>5</sup>Taslim Olawale Elias, The Nigerian Legal System (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963) 291.

girls were mostly governed by the rate of their physical development. Usually tropical climate girls began their menstrual cycle very early. One could hardly find a girl who had experienced two menstrual cycles under the roof of her parents, before she was given away in marriage. Thus, there were fewer unmarried girls available for the majority of the men to have more than one.

It would be in error to assume that paganism, which beyond a doubt was the original religion of the Nigerian people, was very loose in its moral judgments or standards. True enough, the religion did not see anything wrong with the practice of polygamy, but neither did Judaism. For example, heathens were very strict about taboos such as adultery and incest. But the ancient people of Nigeria embraced polygamy without any reservation or limitations. A single man could marry as many wives as he could take good care of and get permission from the girls' parents or the girls themselves to marry him.

The first religion to break through paganism was Islam, which came into Nigeria through the north by the Fulanis around 1804.<sup>6</sup> The founder of Islam, Mohammed, had studied the writings of the Hebrew Scripture very diligently and had seen that having several wives was plainly permissible by Allah (God).<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid having too many wives, the faithful Muslims were instructed that they might take no more than four wives at a

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<sup>6</sup>Edwin W. Smith, Events in African History (New York: Committee on Africa, the War, and Peace Aims, 1942) 14.

<sup>7</sup>Walter M. Gallichan, Woman Under Polygamy (London: Holden and Hardingham, 1914) 37.

time.<sup>8</sup> Divorce is also sanctioned by the Law of the Koran. This divorce law does not follow the Shammai school of thought that holds that divorce should be granted on the grounds of adultery only. Rather, the teaching of the Illel school was practiced, and divorce could happen for reasons such as: poor cooking, untidiness, ugliness or diminishing love for one's wife.<sup>9</sup>

The marriage ideal of Islam is a modification of the pagan religion: it reduces the number of wives from infinity to only four at a time. As good as this ideal may seem to be to a Muslim, the encouragement to divorce on any grounds nullifies the moderation principle of only four wives just as monogamy that permits divorce is as bad and evil as the western world claims polygamy is.

Despite the fact that Islam came in with force (though jihad), many people in Nigeria later became Muslims of their own accord. It is hard to know the reaction of the Muslim leaders toward those heathens who had already acquired more than four wives before they became Muslims. Today, however, Muslim leaders do not condone any Muslim who marries even five wives at a time. Though there is a lack of evidence to justify my statement, I strongly believe that exceptions are made for exceeding the limit of four wives, for example, kings who have many wives by inheritance and personal marriages.

Over forty years had elapsed after the coming of Islam before Christianity was formally introduced to the Nigerian people through the

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<sup>9</sup>Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 34.



south. I used the words "formally introduced," because the British had already come to colonize the country and to practice slave trade, before the missionary movement began around 1845 in Nigeria.<sup>10</sup>

As the missionaries came in to preach, so did they come to spread "civilization." Civilization was seen and measured according to the Western standard. Anything different from the Western civilization was criticized, and change was almost immediately effected or demanded. Of course, almost everything was condemned by the missionaries, from the way the Nigerians drank water to the way they showed respect to their parents and elders. Even the British administrators were criticized by the missionaries for compromising with the natives for political and self-interest reasons.<sup>11</sup>

It has ever been the natural instinct of the white man to think that the black man cannot do anything right.<sup>12</sup> This ethnocentric attitude applied to the mode of marriage of the people, especially the practice of polygamy. It is obvious that the missionaries knew of the church's position against polygamy. They have always presumed that monogamy is a necessary consequence of Christianity. Therefore, many missionaries were more occupied with maintaining the position of the Christian ideal of

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<sup>10</sup>C.P. Graves, The Planting of Christianity in Africa (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954) 50. See also Sulayman S. Nyang, Islam, Christianity and African Identity (Brattleboro: Amana Books, 1984) 62.

<sup>11</sup>C.G. Baeta, Christianity in Tropical Africa (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 1.

<sup>12</sup>Bankole Timothy, Missionary Shepherds and African Sheep (Ibaden: Daystar Press, 1971) 12.

marriage than with explaining it.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, some of the attitudes of missionaries toward polygamous converts are unchristian and unjust. The first step the missionaries expected the converted polygamous fathers to take was to divorce the mothers of their own children. They considered this step almost as important as faith in Christ, for the polygamist to be fully accepted into the Christian fellowship. This shows that divorce, despite its disruption of the existing family unity and continuity is preferred over and above polygamy by the missionaries.<sup>14</sup> It is evident that the missionaries presumed that a second marriage is not a marriage at all, but a form of adultery.

Because of polygamous practices, various solutions were arrived at by the Western Protestant missionaries in Africa on who should be admitted into the church.<sup>15</sup> They were:

1. All the women and children may be baptized, but not the husband.
2. Only those who are not polygamously married may be baptized.
3. The husband may be baptized, if he retains his first wife and divorces the others.
4. The husband may be baptized, if he divorces all but the preferred wife.
5. All may be baptized with the understanding that any sub-

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<sup>13</sup>Hillman, 34. See also Geoffrey Parrinder, African Traditional Religion (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1954) 143.

<sup>14</sup>Alan R. Tippet, "Polygamy as a Missionary Problem An Anthropological Issue," Practical Anthropology 17 (1970) 78.

<sup>15</sup>Hillman, 31.

sequent plural marriages are forbidden.

6. On the testimony of their faith alone, any of them may be baptized with no other previous conditions.

Solution five and six were rarely applied by the missionary churches. As we shall see shortly, it was the independent churches that held to those solutions.

Taber's censure of missionaries on the solutions of divorce of wives reads:

Seldom if ever did missionaries consider the fate of rejected wives and children, much less assume any responsibility for those victims of their inflexibility. But, in fact, in societies which practice polygny, this is the basic pattern of marriage, clearly distinguished from adultery, and providing in a very practical way for all women and children. The creation of an unprecedented class of unattached women and children in such societies is a disruptive factor of enormous proportions. Not a few women have no resource but prostitution. It does not seem to me that such a harsh policy<sup>16</sup> is in any way comparative with the imperative of Christian love.

The solutions suggested by the Nigerian missionary churches were grossly inconsistent; unscriptural and mere human-made laws. Just because polygamy was no longer practiced in the West did not mean that polygamy should be labelled as "bad." As Saint Augustine mentioned, "When polygamy was a common custom, it was no crime; it ranks as a crime now because it is no longer customary."<sup>17</sup> Pope Saint Gregory the Great, in his missionary guidelines, advised that "Change that is absolutely necessary should be gradual because it is very impossible to cut off all

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<sup>16</sup>M.D.W. Jeffreys, "Polygamy in the Christian Fold," Practical Anthropology 19 (March-April 1972) 85.

<sup>17</sup>Hillman, 21-22.

wrongs at once. A step-by-step and pace-by-pace approach is needed." Gregory also admonished the missionaries not to punish polygamists for the marriages they had entered into through ignorance and before baptism, because "Sometimes a fault must be tolerated in those who have acted through ignorance."<sup>18</sup>

In 1857, the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Henry Venn, issued a memorandum expressing that no polygamist should be accepted into church membership. Bishop Ajayi Crowther, who translated the English King James Version of the Bible into Yoruba, (one of the major languages in Nigeria) and some others supported Venn's position, and opposed any compromise from the church on any issue dealing with polygamy.<sup>19</sup>

At the third Lambeth Conference in 1888, the bishops adopted three resolutions:

1. That baptized converts who took a second wife be excommunicated.
2. That polygamists must not be accepted.
3. That wives of polygamists might be baptized under certain conditions.<sup>20</sup>

In 1895 the Methodists passed a resolution in Lagos Synod that no polygamist be recommended for membership or continue in full membership unless he became a monogamist. This position was reaffirmed in 1917.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 32f. See also Adrian Hastings, African Christianity (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 38.

<sup>20</sup>Baeta, 225.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

The American Baptists, wanting to arrive at a resolution according to the Baptist polity by consulting with the congregation on the issue of polygamy, were discouraged by S. G. Pinnock, an influential American Baptist missionary. The missionary body approved Pinnock's suggestion that churches should be warned against admitting polygamists into the church membership, and this position became a resolution in 1903. In 1910 all Baptist churches that depended on foreign funding were warned that any church that has polygamists as members would not be given financial support.<sup>22</sup>

All the above rulings are dogmatic in execution, and only a few privileged people made decisions on the sensitive issue of polygamy. They coerced the churches by threats, not persuasion, and turned a spiritual organization into a strict political legalistic institution.

Patrick Iteka views the principle of forcing a polygamist to divorce all his wives except the first one as an example of "serious discrimination against women,"<sup>23</sup> in that women are not given any choice or say as to whether they want to divorce their common husbands.

Nathaniel Inyamah evaluated such solutions by the missionary churches as lacking in common sense; they knew from the beginning that God welcomes all men into the church, in spite of their customs, including polygamous marriage. Such evaluation could be attributed to the Vatican Council II, which, out of ignorance, equated polygamy with "free

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 226.

<sup>23</sup>Patrick Iteka, "Polygamy and the Local Church," AFER 23 (February-April 1981) 207.

love" and called it a "disfigurement of marriage."<sup>24</sup> Traditional African polygamy is certainly not entered into for mere satisfaction of male lust. Polygamy has its own advantages and disadvantages and so does monogamy, as shall be pointed out in chapter four.

To worsen the church's solution to polygamy, Euglebert Kofor of Cameron in West Africa offered a somewhat unrealistic and unbiblical suggestion that a converted polygamist must promise the church that he will live with his other wives as brother to sisters and actually marry only one of them.<sup>25</sup> Why should the women suffer by depriving them of their fundamental basic need namely sexual satisfaction? This male chauvinistic attitude has made many men see women as sex objects and at the same time treat them as having no sexual feelings.

Alan Tippet has correctly noted that "When marriage pattern is interfered with, the social life of the community is threatened." Many things can be easily changed in society, but the family is not one of them, because the family structure is built to endure. Tippet affirms that:

The family is a configuration within the larger configuration of the tribal entity itself and any change which threatens existing institution which serves the function of maintaining tribal perpetuity is always subject to obstruction.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Nathaniel G.N. Inyamah, "Polygamy and the Christian Church," Concordia Theological Monthly 43 (March 1972) 142-3.

<sup>25</sup>Benezeri Kitembo, Laurenti Magesa, and Alvard Shorter, African Christian Marriage (London: Chapman, 1977) 90-1.

<sup>26</sup>Tippet, 78.

This is proven right by the reaction of some Christian converts in Nigeria. As early as 1890, a large number of Anglicans broke away from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to form an African church in which they could be governed by their own bishop. They believed that monogamy is not realistic in African society. They vehemently argued for tolerance of polygamy, particularly on the part of the first generation converts who had already contracted polygamous marriages.

Similar breakaways were evident in other denominations, so as to take a lenient position on polygamous converts. Between 1888 and 1920, the African Church Movement began to spring up in big towns like Lagos. Five major denominations were formed: The Native Baptists 1888, The United Native African (UNA) 1891, The African Church (broke away from the Anglicans) 1901, The West African Episcopal 1903, and The United African Methodist 1917. All these indigenous denominations realized that they must come to terms with the polygamous household, in order to draw the interest of many Nigerians. They also included most of the traditional practices that were rejected by the missionaries who associated them with pagan worship, such as : drumming, dancing, and indigenous music praising God.<sup>27</sup> But, polygamy was still a problem among the indigenous churches, because there were different degrees of tolerance of polygamy among the laity. Some of these denominations called the polygamous Christians the weaker Christians, and monogamy was recognized as the ideal. The ministers of some indigenous churches could not be poly-

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<sup>27</sup> Baeta, 227ff.

gamists. However, in the United Native African and the West African Episcopal churches polygamy was freely practiced among the laity and the clergy.<sup>28</sup>

Some of the reasons why these indigenous churches openly accepted polygamists into their churches was that many of the Christians who legally have one wife have more concubines outside their matrimonial homes officially unknown to their legal wife. They therefore upheld polygamy and condemned concubinage as a degraded form of polygamy, as a hypocritical, immoral and sinful act which was particularly singled out and condemned by Christ's teachings.<sup>29</sup> The same practice went on in the Graeco-Roman social structure where polygamy was rejected as the ideal. Concubinage became very strong, and it was not until the sixteenth century that concubinage was finally and fully eradicated by the church.<sup>30</sup>

The African church saw their duty as providing a spiritual home for the polygamous pagan who was disillusioned with his old religion but had been refused admission by the missionary churches.

In the constitution of the United Native African Church of Nigeria, a passage about marriage and polygamy reads:

This organization would therefore urge its members to support unflinchingly and encourage the native of African form or system of marriage best suited to the laws, customs, and idiosyncracies of the natives of Africa, and, it is of paramount importance that the laws and regulations guiding the principles of that system be

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Harry Boer, "Polygamy," Frontier 11 (Spring 1968) 24-7.



definitely observed and encouraged. This organization did not preach polygamy, but tolerates it whenever that is the custom of the people, and congenial to the surroundings. It abhors the forcing of monogamy or foreign system of marriage among its members firmly believing that neither monogamy nor polygamy is essential to Christian Salvation, and since it cannot be proved from the Holy Scriptures that polygamy is a sin,<sup>31</sup> the United Native African Church did not regard polygamy to be a sin.

One can see that the UNAC is open to the historico-cultural situation of the community. Likewise, it is open to biblical interpretation, rather than biblical inference. Monogamy may be practiced and held as the ideal form of marriage by many Christians; yet the fact cannot be dismissed that it is the custom of the Western world that has been forcefully transmitted to the African Christians.

It would be an injustice on the part of any writer to condemn missionaries as a whole for their hypocritical view on polygamy, since there is substantial evidence that many of the missionaries were coerced into eradicating polygamy from the church. Superintendent Hartmann of the Moravian Mission was one of these. He was quoted as having written in one of his letters that:

I have given you the official view of our church as well as our view as missionaries on this (polygamy) problem. But I feel that by our narrow approach on the problem influenced by European theories, a tremendous havoc is done to the African people. I myself shall never ask a man to dismiss his wives. It is cruel, immoral, and has nothing to do with Christ at all. Nothing but stubborn theories, doctrines as hard as a stone without understanding of the problem<sup>32</sup> and without love. I have done it once in my life and never again.

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<sup>31</sup>R.O. Ekundare, Marriage and Divorce Under Yoruba Customary Law (Ibaden: University of Ife Press, 1969) 1.

<sup>32</sup>Gunnar Helander, Must We Introduce Monogamy? (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1958) 69. See T.A. Beetham, Christianity and the New Africa (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967) 42.

Likewise, the Anglican Bishop of Zululand in South Africa confirmed that "it is not easy to prove the necessity for monogamy by reference to the New Testament. We appeal rather to the long tradition of the Church."<sup>33</sup>

After 1920, some mission churches reacted to the success of the African Church Movement, and they began to tolerate a kind of concealed polygamy among the laity. Less excommunication was made by the church upon its discovery that a member had turned polygamous. Anglican bishops like J. W. Colenso came to the conclusion that polygamists who had entered into their matrimonial engagements before knowing the Christian demand in marriage should not be asked to divorce all their wives save one, but should be admitted to baptism as they were. Colenso was criticized and dragged to court for his heretical teaching, where he was found guilty of all charges against him. He was stripped of his office as bishop and was prohibited from exercising any ministerial office within his province. Less than a year later he was reinstated, after the court ruling was counter ruled to be null and void.<sup>34</sup>

Missionaries like David Livingstone, out of sympathy for the polygamist converts, were silent about the matter of polygamists divorcing their wives. They only encouraged any polygamist who voluntarily wished to become a monogamist to do so.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>34</sup>Baeta, 265. See also Geoffrey Parrinder, Africa's Three Religions (London: Sheldon Press, 1969) 128.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 102ff.

In 1930 the constitution of the independent churches read,  
 "We do not dismiss polygamists, neither do we encourage monogamists to marry more, nor do we ask bachelors to marry at all."<sup>36</sup>

In 1957 and 1961 there were no conclusive progress made on the issue of Primates who have more than one wife. After several debates the following conclusions were reached:

The constitution of the Church already settles the matter in its own way, and we cannot change that in our conference. We might decide for monogamy but can we enforce that on the Primate? And if God has revealed to him that he can have more than one wife, is God divided on this issue? The present position does not force anyone to have more than one wife, so there is no urgency in the matter, which will settle itself through social and environmental changes in the course<sup>37</sup> of time, and for the whole church at the level of its constitution.

This conclusion leaves a wide open door for both church officers and laity to practice polygamy almost forever. The indefiniteness of when polygamy would be resolved is glaringly expressed; and if monogamy would prevail that must be the decision of the African people, rather than allow Western culture norms to be imposed on the Africans.

A large number of these independent churches are still persecuted in one way or another by the missionary churches, either by not including them in the ecumenical fellowship of churches or by not regarding them as an authentic Christian community, just because of their polygamous practice.

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<sup>36</sup>H.W. Turner, African Independent Church (London: Clarendon Press, 1967) 247.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 249.

It has been revealed that many nations are now banning the practice of polygamy; yet the record shows that polygamy is only a crime theoretically. It still exists practically. For example, Tunisia was the first Muslim state to abolish polygamy in 1956, but about 3% of the people are still polygamists.<sup>38</sup> In the Belgian Congo, where polyandry was common, the government passed a decree April 4, 1950, to abolish any form of polygamy and to nullify previous polygamous unions all over the country. Angola condemned polygamous unions in 1948. Ivory Coast nullified polygamy in 1964. Guinea abolished polygamy in 1963, and Central Africa Republic followed suit in 1966.<sup>39</sup> Yugoslavia banned polygamy around 1950, but allowed the pre-existing polygamous marriages to continue.<sup>40</sup> In 1963, Ghana enforced the registration of only one wife, but permits polygamy to continue. Legally, this makes the children of the unregistered wives in Ghana illegitimate and unrecognized to claim their inheritance after the death of their father, in the absence of a will.<sup>41</sup>

Of the countries mentioned above, the government of Yugoslavia handled the ban of polygamy with more genuine concern for the people than the African missionaries in their effort to abolish polygamy in the church by allowing pre-existing polygamous marriages to continue. All of

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<sup>38</sup>Inyamah, 142.

<sup>39</sup>Arthur Philips and Henry Francis Morris, Marriage Laws In Africa (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) 12, 47.

<sup>40</sup>Joseph Y. Pillsbury, Muslim-Christian Conflicts (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978) 202.

<sup>41</sup>Philips and Morris, 39-40.

the countries mentioned above, except Ghana, prove that a polygamous nation can, by decree, become monogamous.

Just as a polygamous community can become monogamous, so can a monogamous community decide to be polygamous, if necessity warrants it. The best example for the possibility of such occurrence had been cited by Kenneth Hughes while tracing the history of polygamy. The following shows the findings of Hughes:

In 1650, two years after the close of the 30 Years War which has decimated the male population of Western Europe, the Frankish parliament at Nuremburg legislated permission for every man to marry two wives...The West, under the lash of a natural emergency, legislated bigamy after a thousand years of Christianity...The cultural development of a people is not the determining factor of...marital concepts. Sociological factors determine the ethics. It is with deep understanding recalling how vulnerable we of the Judeo-Christian tradition are, that we should approach other cultures in regard to relationships between sexes. We live in a glass house, we cannot afford a holier-than-thou posture.<sup>42</sup>

In view of the above quotation one can say that nobody can predict a total extirpation of the polygamic impulse, even though polygamous marriage may be disappearing.

In Nigeria today, there are several ways in which marriage can become legally binding. One is under the Customary Law, another is under the Muslim Law and the other is under the Marriage Ordinance which was first introduced to the country in 1863. The Marriage Ordinance type includes: marriage held in the church, marriage held at registry and marriage by special license.

Marriage under Customary Law and Muslim Law are polygamous. The former has no limit to the number of wives, while the latter has a limit

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<sup>42</sup>Inyamah, 142f.

of four wives. The Marriage Ordinance is monogamous, and any monogamous marriage contracted outside the country by a citizen is usually equated with marriage under the Ordinance. Marriage under the Ordinance can be performed for anyone, regardless of one's faith or religion, so long as the person wants to be monogamous. The crime of bigamy applies when a man contracted his marriage by Ordinance and then takes another wife by any form. The wife has the full right to prosecute her husband, if she has enough evidence to justify her claim. If the husband is found guilty, he may serve a jail sentence from one year and up.<sup>43</sup>

Experience has proved that if the church offers an open door to baptize new converts who are polygamists, the church will not necessarily be compromising its moral standards, nor will it make the younger generation of Christians enter into polygamy. The case in point is the bold step taken by the Lutheran Church in Liberia which is baptizing the converted polygamous husbands and their wives and allowing them to partake on communion.<sup>44</sup> They did so in order to separate the action from the doer; that is, it is polygamy that is being rejected, not the men and women who were polygamists before the Christian message was preached to them. What a smart, Spirit-guided move that is! The result has proved that instead of an increase in the ratio of polygamists in the church, there is a decrease, since many people now hate the polygamous practice having seen the enormous responsibility it can bring.

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<sup>43</sup>Akinola Aguda, The Marriage Laws of Nigeria (Ibadan: University of Ife, 1966) passim. See also Thomas Price, African Marriage (London: SCM Press, 1954)

<sup>44</sup>Hillman, 34.

### Summary

While the Nigerian missionary churches have retained their dogmatic approach to polygamy, it is clear that satisfactory explanations for such a position are yet to be given. It is not enough to say that polygamy is not conducive to Christian living, because the solutions given for the acceptance of polygamists have done more damage than good to the polygamists.

There is nothing obscure about the fact that many of the practices condemned by the Bible and practiced by the West were deliberately ignored or justified by the church. As Fiorenza and other feminist writers have noted, the Bible has been used by the "powerful" as a weapon to further oppress the "weak."<sup>45</sup> Instead of being the messenger of the Gospel of Christ, they became lords over the people they were supposed to serve, by laying heavy burdens upon the poor heathens who had sought diligently for years to find the true God whose love and grace exceed all human comprehension.

The missionaries saw nothing wrong with monogamy, whereas, as Walter Gallichan pointed out, chaotic promiscuity, wild love, and prostitution flourish under the Western pseudo-monogamic system; some people in the West live more licentiously than some in the East who practice polygamy. What must be understood is that monogamy cannot be adapted to the needs of a whole race. Gallichan also reveals that in the monogamous marriages of the West at least fifty percent of sexual intercourse occurs

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<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 16-7.

outside of wedlock.<sup>46</sup> The church may not condone such laissez-faire living, but at least there has been the problem of divorce and remarriage in the Western churches for ages.

The rate of polygamy generally fluctuates according to the desire and economic stability of the people. When life becomes easier and there is enough money, the situation can call for men marrying more wives. Since Christ is for the whole world and heathens and Muslims alike still practice polygamy without any discrimination and reservation, the missionary churches will continue to be faced with the problem of either accepting or rejecting the polygamists.

The missionary churches should know that there is a sharp distinction between a polygamist coming out of paganism or Islam who seeks to enter the fellowship of the family of God, and a member of God's family who becomes a polygamist. The latter has no excuse, because he knows what is "right" but voluntarily disobeys, while the former has no prior understanding of what the church standard of marriage is. It is wrong, unchristian, ungodly, and unbiblical to think that we must have monogamy as a common principle in the church, before the church members can truly be of one Spirit in practice is faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Any additional rule is definitely man-made.

African churches, especially Nigerian churches, should give polygamous converts a chance to become full members of the church. Even if the church sees polygamy as evil, and it is too late to teach these converts the social evils of polygamy, their children will not be lost to

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<sup>46</sup>Gallichan, 317.



other world religions forever. The Nigerian churches should save souls that are perishing, instead of condemning and destroying them at the door of salvation. "They shall surely know the truth later and the truth will set them free," only through our loving teachings and understanding.

## CHAPTER II

## ENGAGEMENT OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES

It is necessary to clarify the important goal to which I want to direct our attention in this chapter. I am by no means trying to justify polygamy with biblical passages. Rather, I only want us to view carefully how God, as interpreted in Scripture, who changes not, treated the men and the women who were engaged in polygamous marriages. It would be too farfetched to assume that polygamy was the order of the day in the Old and New Testament eras. The mere fact that polygamy existed during those periods is worth our serious consideration.

Whether we Christians regard the Bible as the supreme doctrinal authority on faith and morals, divine in origin and consequently infallible,<sup>1</sup> or, as:

The utterances of real individual men, who wrote out of their own intensely personal experience so that they should be read as the record of an historic process of discovery or revelation, in which the cumulative experience of individuals through many generations built up a firm structure of faith and knowledge of God.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible is still the book that tells Christians about God.

One way to rightly read the Bible for interpretation and exegetical purposes has been set down for us by John Milton:

Pay close attention to the language, examine the context, distinguish literal from figurative expression, consider what has gone before and what comes after, compare one text with another, and, (to

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<sup>1</sup>C.H. Dodd, The Authority of the Bible (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929) 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 13.

differentiate the doctrine of God from the fallacies of human reasoning) to admit no inferences but such as follow necessarily and plainly from the words themselves.<sup>3</sup>

If we have to begin with the first Bible passage that has generated much argument among scholars for and against polygamy, then Genesis 2:24 must be brought into focus. Roland de Vaux has held that God's original intention for marriage was based on monogamy by creating one man (Adam) and one woman (Eve), and God joined them together as husband and wife.<sup>4</sup> The only problem with this position is that the creation of a single pair of human beings by God is not explicit in chapter 1:26-27. God did not make a man, but the species of man in two sexes. In most cases Adam stands for mankind, while Eve stands for womankind. Only in a few cases are these names used as proper nouns for specific individuals.<sup>5</sup> To press this argument, one will see a big lapse in the creation story if only one man were created, because when they had children, (Cain being the first born) the Bible tells us that he went out into another place and took a wife (Genesis 4:16). Where did Cain's wife come from? Or was she Cain's sister?

To dwell on the marriage of Adam and Eve as constituting the first marriage by God, which makes monogamy God's ideal marriage, has little ground on the basis of what the Bible says alone.

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<sup>3</sup>Leo Miller, John Milton Among the Polygamophiles (New York: Loewenthal Press, 1974) 8-9.

<sup>4</sup>Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 24.

<sup>5</sup>B.S. Childs, "Adam," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) I, 42.

According to some passages in the Bible, polygamy existed before the time of the patriarchs. Polygamous practice is first mentioned in Genesis 4:19 when Lamech, from the reprobate line of Cain, took two wives.

Our discussion of polygamy in the Old Testament becomes highly important as we come to the patriarchal characters. Abraham, the first of the patriarchs, was a polygamist, according to Genesis 16:1-3. John Calvin believes that to have called Hagar Abraham's wife, just because they had sexual relationships together with the consent of Sarah, was improper. Calvin considers this union as neither fornication nor marriage, but an illicit affair which God did not sanction.<sup>6</sup>

Leonard Woolley, on the other hand, believes that Abraham was following the tradition and custom of his day when he took Hagar for his wife. The Sumerian Law, which is from the Code of Hammurabi issued in Babylon about 1700 B.C., allows a man married to a barren woman to either divorce her or take another wife who cannot in any way share equal rights with the first wife. The wife may also give her husband her maid or slave who will be enfranchised as soon as a child is born.<sup>7</sup> Van Seter writes that Abraham took another wife out of necessity. Abraham needed an heir, since he was rich in cattle, silver, and gold, but Sarah could not have any children for him.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, Genesis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) I, 426.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Woolley, Abraham (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) 151.

<sup>8</sup> John Van Seter, Abraham in History and Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) 224. See Vaux, 24.

Whatever the reason for Abraham's polygamous act, the point is that Abraham became a polygamist. Despite Abraham's marital life, he was called the friend of God (James 2:23), and his faith in God earned him the title of "man of righteousness" (Isaiah 4:8; I Chronicles 20:7). God dealt with Abraham as a person, though he was a polygamist, and his way of life did not jeopardize his having the son of promise.

We must not end the story of Abraham here. His polygamous life ended in divorce, but God took care of Hagar and Ishmael and made the name of Ishmael great also (Genesis 17:20).

Jacob was the son of a monogamist, Isaac, but he himself was a polygamist. Jacob was the first man mentioned in the Bible to have married two sisters. His own reason for being a polygamist was deliberate, despite what happened between him and his Uncle Laban. Jacob ended up having four wives at the same time by taking the two slave girls of his wives. Jacob was blessed by God's angel, and his new name (Israel) became the name of a nation. The names of his sons from his polygamous union became the main tribes of the nation Israel. Here, also, God dealt with a man, regardless of his marital status.

Obviously Esau, Jacob's brother, was a polygamist, too (Genesis 28:9 and 36:2). Both sons of Isaac (a monogamist) were polygamists.

During the time of the Judges and the monarch, polygamy was also practiced. Gideon had many wives and at least one concubine (Judges 8:30-31). Yet Gideon was used mightily by God in Israel's army, and he subdued many nations for God's people.

In Deuteronomy 17:16-17, the king was warned not to multiply to himself horses, wives, silver, and gold. I doubt that Parrinder's

interpretation that this passage means that the king should be a monogamist is correct.<sup>9</sup> If the warning against having a multiplicity of horses, silver, and gold does not imply that the king should have only one of each, it would be unfair to say that the king is expected to have only one wife. Multiplicity of these things should be seen as "having too many of them" or "accumulation" of them. The warning, therefore, is that the king must do everything with moderation and not in excess.

Deuteronomy 21:15-17 makes Deuteronomy 17:17 clearer. Here polygamists were given a guideline to follow:

If a man have (sic) two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the first-born son be hers that was hated: Then he shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved first-born before the son of the hated, which is indeed the first-born: But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the first-born, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: For he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the first-born is his. (KJV).

The Bible talks about Elkanah in I Samuel 1:1-2. Elkanah had two wives, but one was barren. The barren wife prayed to the Lord for the blessing of a child, and the Lord heard her prayers by giving her a male child called Samuel.<sup>10</sup> The consequences of this polygamous marriage are two. The first is that the Lord heard the prayer of a polygamous wife, and the second is that the child of a polygamist later became the priest of God and the judge of Israel. God accepted Samuel as a person, whereas the children of polygamists are rejected by the church today.

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<sup>9</sup>Geoffrey Parrinder, The Bible and Polygamy (London: S.P.C.K., 1950) 17.

<sup>10</sup>Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets (Palo Alto: Review and Herald, 1979) 530f.

By the time of the kings, polygamy was widely practiced and void of limitation. According to II Samuel 12:8, Saul, the first king of Israel, was a polygamist.

King David was a polygamist, yet he was "the man after God's own heart." David became the yardstick by which the kings after him were judged. God made a personal covenant with David just as He did with Abraham, yet both were polygamists. Above all, Jesus Christ was promised to come out of the line of David, a polygamist.<sup>11</sup> What Prophet Nathan said about the wives of David in II Samuel 12:7-8 when he was confronted for being responsible for Uraiah's death is very striking.

...Thus said the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee King over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul; And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things. (KJV).

Solomon was a polygamist of the highest order. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines, according to the Scriptures. Many scholars believe that this figure is exaggerated.<sup>12</sup> Some have also attributed Solomon's fall with his acquiring too many wives.<sup>13</sup> The Bible states that his fall came because he married foreign wives who turned his heart from Yahweh unto other gods. I doubt if his marrying foreigners caused his fall, because Moses also married a foreigner (Numbers 12:1).<sup>14</sup> The fall of Solomon came about because he let his wives turn his heart away from God

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 664f.

<sup>12</sup>Parrinder, 13.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 18.

to other gods.

Solomon was the wisest king Israel has ever known in its history. Under him Israel enjoyed its most prosperous time in history. God used him so wholeheartedly that He allowed Solomon to build Him a temple—the first in the history of Israel. The fame of Solomon is yet to be equalled among the kings of Israel, and this man was a polygamist.

If God allowed Solomon to do all the great things that he did and overlooked polygamy because it was the custom of the people in Solomon's time, the same should apply to the polygamous system in Africa today.

Other Old Testament characters who are believed to have contracted polygamous marriages are: Caleb, Manasseh, Rehoboam (with 18 wives and 60 concubines) (II Chronicles 11:17, 21, 23), and Joash, who took two wives on the advice of Jehoiada, the most holy and wise priest of Judah.<sup>15</sup> All these were used by God for special missions, though they were polygamists.

#### Marriage as an Analogy in the Old Testament

Parrinder points out the passages in the Old Testament that deal with the monogamous relationship of God with Israel. Parrinder therefore sees such analogies as condemning polygamy.<sup>16</sup> If we are to take such accounts literally, we see God as the "groom" and Israel as the "bride," but the "bride" is the one running after other "grooms." In essence, polyandry and polygyny is condemned.

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<sup>15</sup>Miller, 11.

<sup>16</sup>Parrinder, 32.



Speaking on figurative or analogical passages, Ezekiel, chapter 23, is pertinent here. God himself says in verse four that He took two sisters, Aholah and Aholibah, as wives. John Milton says that this parabolic passage shows that bigamy could not have been considered dishonorable and shameful in the time of Ezekiel and before God.<sup>17</sup>

#### Levirate Law and Polygamy in the Bible

The levirate rite, in which the wife or wives of a deceased man who is childless would be passed to his brothers or next of kin was widely practiced in the Old Testament era. The first instance of levirate in the Old Testament is found in Genesis 38 where Onan shirks his responsibility and is said to have received the death penalty from God.<sup>18</sup>

According to a law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, after the death of a brother, a surviving brother takes the widow as his wife, and the first-born of the new marriage is regarded as the legal son of the deceased. It is a dishonorable action for the surviving brother to decline this obligation, though it is possible. According to custom, when a brother declines, the widow would take off the decliner's shoe and spit in his face, because he has failed to raise up his deceased brother's house.<sup>19</sup>

The story of Ruth presents us with the customs where levirate rite requires the next of kin or clan member of the deceased to per-

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<sup>17</sup>Miller, 9.

<sup>18</sup>Vaux, 37. See also G.K. Falusi, "African Levirate and Christianity," AFER 24 (1982) 301.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

petuate the name of the dead.

Levirate practice can cause a monogamous home to become polygamous, because the widow is married to the surviving brother on a permanent basis, whether or not he is already married and only the first born is legally the deceased brother's.

The only reference to levirate case in the New Testament is ambiguous, because it is difficult to know if any of the seven brothers who married the same widow, according to levirate law, already had a wife. Since this case is one of many which proves that levirate law still existed in the time of Jesus, one can assume that a married man could still marry his brother's widow. However, it is obvious that Jesus did not condemn the levirate practice of His time.

#### Leviticus 18:18

Angelo Tosato used Leviticus 18:18 to argue for monogamy. The passage says, "And you shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister as a rival while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness." (NAS) Angelo Tosato, knowing that Leviticus 18 contains a long series of laws against incestuous unions, uses a different translation of Leviticus 18:18 which corresponds with the Qumran community, "And you shall not take a woman as a rival wife to another..." Tosato then argues that the latter translation prohibits bigamy, polygamy and divorce. Tosato's position is a distortion of the original intention of the writer of Leviticus, as Tosato himself first stated. Incest among in-laws is condemned, not

polygamy or divorce.<sup>20</sup>

### New Testament Teaching on Polygamy

The New Testament passages generally used by the church against polygamy are very flimsy ones, as indicated by Oswald C. Fountain. The reason for his position is that most of them are inferential, rather than contextual.<sup>21</sup> These passages are Matthew 19:1-9; Ephesians 5:22-23; I Timothy 3:2, 12; and Titus 1:6.

Robert Holst interpreted the phrase "so they shall become one flesh: (Matt. 19 and Mark 10) as equivalent to "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." Holst sees this phrase as meaning "to become one family" or "blood relatives." He cited the Laban-Jacob encounter where Laban said to Jacob, "You are truly my bone and flesh," (Gen. 29:14) which means they were blood relatives. Holst's conclusion is that it is possible for a man and several wives to be one flesh, because the Genesis 2 account that is quoted by Jesus in Matthew and Mark does not indicate monogamous family intentions; instead the indissolubility of marriage is expressed. Holst sees Jesus as answering a question on divorce, not polygamy.<sup>22</sup>

In Ephesians 5:22-23, Paul views marriage as symbolic to the church. Parrinder argues that the use of the phrase "They two shall be

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<sup>20</sup>Angelo Tosato, "The Law of Leviticus 18:18: A Reexamination," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 46 (April 1984) 200.

<sup>21</sup>Oswald C. Fountain, "Polygamy and the Church," Missiology 2 (1974) 112.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Holst, "Polygamy and the Bible," International Review of Missions 56 (April 1967) 205f.

one flesh" reinforces the monogamic teaching of Paul.<sup>23</sup> If Paul teaches monogamy, it should not surprise us, because he tends to exalt celibacy at the expense of marriage (I Corinthians 7:1, 7, 8). Paul only sees marriage as an escape from committing fornication.

Willard Burce and Geoffrey Parrinder classify polygamy as sin. While Burce sees polygamy as a transgression from God's plan for the family, as the Bible teaches in Genesis 1 and 2, Parrinder sees polygamy as fornication and adultery. Burce argues that the Christian is a new creation in Christ (II Cor. 5:17). Therefore, God's creation order must be a norm for the Christian (Matt. 19:4-6; Eph. 5:31). Since baptism is inseparably associated with repentance (Mk. 1:4; Acts 2:38), and since repentance means to turn away from sin to God (Acts 14:15) never again to continue to sin (Rom 6), polygamists must first be monogamists in order to be baptized. It is unfortunate that Burce doesn't have his facts right, because the Bible he quotes from extensively does not call polygamy a sinful union. Burce's so-called "God's creation order" is an inference and not a direct command.<sup>24</sup>

To cite Ephesians 5:22-23 as an argument against polygamy on the ground of the sacramentality of Christian marriage is to mistake Paul's main ideal of unity and love that is projected in the passage. Paul expects unity and love to be reflected in Christian marriage, as should be the case in the relationship of Christ and the church. But unity and love can also be realized in both monogamous and polygamous marriages. In

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<sup>23</sup>Parrinder, 54.

<sup>24</sup>Willard Burce, "Polygamy and the Church," Concordic Theological Monthly 34 (April 1963) 224f., and Parrinder, 34.

fact, a polygamous family can be used as an analogy for the relationship of Christ and his church than a monogamous one. This is what I mean-- if Christ is the head of the church (which He is), and the husband is the head of the household (which he is according to the Scriptures), as the local church (consisting of many believers) is united under Christ, so is the family (consisting of many wives) united under the husband. As the church is one, so also is a polygamous family one.

In I Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6 it is not clear what the writer or writers wanted the church leaders to do. Holst and Dibelius agreed that the Greek injunction of Paul to church leaders, "*μὴ ἔσθαι γυναῖκας ἑσθλὰς*," has three or four possible interpretations. It could mean:

1. Church leaders could not be polygamous.
2. Church leaders could not take a second wife, even after the first wife had died or divorced.
3. Church leaders must be faithful--free from fornication in their monogamous marriage.
4. Church leaders could not be single men.<sup>25</sup>

If the first interpretation of the injunction is correct, it could then be that some church members must be practicing polygamy or at least polygamy is theoretically known in the Christian community. If we accept the second interpretation, Paul is not talking about polygamy, but about divorce and remarriage. If we validate the third interpretation, one will see that adultery or fornication, which might be rampant in the Hellenistic community of Paul's days, is condemned. The last interpretation is absurd, if Paul was indeed the writer of the Pastoral Epistles,

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<sup>25</sup>Holst, 210f.

Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, The Pastoral Epistle, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) 52.

since Paul was a celibate and wishes that able Christians would be like him.

One wonders why the writer(s) of I Timothy and Titus gives this injunction to church leaders alone and not to all the household of God, if polygamy did not exist and was not condoned by the church in Paul's time.

From both the Old and the New Testaments, one can emphatically say that there is no single passage where monogamy is explicitly enjoined on all Christians; nor is there any passages where polygamy is explicitly condemned, except for bishops and deacons in I Tim. 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6.

In Romans 7:2-3, Paul talks about the law of marriage. Milton says that Paul cited the example of a woman, not a man, when he said, "She has no right to marry another man while her first husband is still living." It is not said that the man cannot marry another wife while his first wife is living. Milton's point is that polyandry was not permitted, but polygyny was legal.<sup>26</sup>

One of the most popular passages quoted by the Feminist Movement is Galatians 3:28 where Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." This passage is used extensively to justify the equality of men and women. James Nelson believes that care must be taken that the meaning of Paul's statement not be pushed too far. Nelson holds that in Gal. 3:28,

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<sup>26</sup>Miller, 132.

Paul was operating with a futuristic eschatology which did not have a transformative effect upon social relationships in the present time, but, in the new age in Christ, there will be equality and mutuality according to God's original and primordial will.<sup>27</sup>

Paul did not dispute the inherited patterns of sexual inequality, so that "decent order" might be maintained in church and society.

Feminists like Fiorenza believe that Gal. 3:28 applies to today's woman in relation to her male counterpart. Fiorenza's conclusion is that women as well as men have the call to a marriage-free life and mutual rights and obligations within the sexual relationships of marriage. The implication of this interpretation is that if a husband can marry another wife, the wife must also be free to marry another husband. Polygyny and polyandry should therefore exist at the same time in the same family.<sup>28</sup>

Parrinder and some Western scholars have also argued in line with Galatians 3:28 that monogamy is the form of marriage which guarantees respect for the dignity of women and their equality with men.<sup>29</sup> If this statement were true, why are Western women in this twentieth century struggling for equality by establishing Feminist Movements and Feminist Theology, despite the fact that monogamy has been in practice for ages in the West? Are women not seen, in the true sense of the word, as "the second sex?" Women have always been suppressed in the West and have been made to see themselves as the inferior sex. Monogamy, therefore, has not ensured respect for the dignity of women nor for women's fundamental

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<sup>27</sup>James Nelson, Embodiment (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978)

<sup>28</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her (New York: Crossroad, 1984)

<sup>29</sup>Parrinder, 49.

equality with men.

As Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher, has said in her book, The Second Sex, of the monogamous society of the Middle Ages:

Woman was beaten, chastised, dragged by the hair by her master who was her husband...If widowed, woman was expected to accept a new master at once...The woman who seeks independence through work has less favorable possibilities than her masculine competitors. Her wages in most jobs are lower than those of men...for equal work she does not get equal pay...Woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her.<sup>30</sup>

History has shown that the fact that a man has only one wife does not mean that he will respect the dignity of women and their fundamental equality with men. According to the findings of sociologists Straus, Steinmetz, and Gelles, 16 out of every 100 couples in the United States are involved in marital violence. The researchers also estimated that about 1.8 million American wives are beaten by their husbands each year.<sup>31</sup>

The Western church that advocates monogamy on the basis of equality of women and men has persistently excluded women from the priesthood and from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Thus, women are treated as inferior to men, not only in the society, but also in the church.

Another indirect usage of the Bible to defend monogamy is found in the thought of Helmut Thielicke. He based his argument on agape, which he said will make a man and a woman join together with respect and fidelity for each other.<sup>32</sup> I find this argument to be weak. Agape can

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph Omoregbe, "Is Polygamy Incompatible with Christianity?" AFER (December 1979) 21:370f.

<sup>31</sup> Albert R. Roberts (ed.), Battered Women and Their Families (New York: Springer, 1984) 1.

<sup>32</sup> Helmut Thielicke, The Ethics of Sex (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 180f.



also exist between one man and several people at the same time. For instance, the church as a whole should practice agape among one another. Where agape can only be practiced between two individuals, such love is questionable. To illustrate my point, the dialogue between a polygamist and a curious observer is relevant here. A polygamist was asked if it is possible for a man to love more than one wife at a time. The polygamist answered the question by asking the observer, "Is it possible for a mother to love more than one child at a time?"<sup>33</sup> The love for children may not be strictly the same as the love for wives, since sexual intercourse is absent in the former and present in the latter; yet sexual experience is but one part of marriage responsibility.

#### Non-Biblical Evidence for the Existence of Polygamy

Scholars like M. D. W. Jeffreys have sought evidence from contemporary sources to complement biblical writings to show that polygamy was common in Jewish and neighboring cultures before and after Jesus' earthly ministry.

Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian who died in 97 C.E., wrote:

If anyone has two wives; and if he greatly respect and be kind to one of them, either out of his affection to her, or for her beauty, or for some other reason; while the other is of less esteem with him; and if the son of her that is beloved by the younger by birth than another born of the other wife, endeavors to obtain the right of primogeniture from his father's kindness to his mother, and would thereby obtain a double portion of his father's substance, for the double portion is what I have allotted to him in the laws, let not this be permitted; for it is unjust that he who is the elder by birth

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<sup>33</sup>Kimball Young, Isn't One Wife Enough? (New York: Holt, 1954) 181.

should be deprived of what is due to him on the father's disposition of his estate, because his mother was not equally regarded by him.<sup>34</sup>

Josephus' writing is similar to what is found in Deuteronomy 21:15-17. However, Josephus' writing shows that the will of the father to turn the due portion around would be nullified, regardless of the reason given for such action.

H. Dandy quotes an inheritance code for co-wives from the Mishnan as follows:

If a man was married to three wives and he died and the Katubah of one was one mina, of aother 200 denars and of the other 300 denars and he left property worth only one mina, they divide this equally ...If a man has married four wives and he died, the (claim of the) first comes before that of the second, and that of the second before that of the third, and that of the third before that of the fourth.<sup>35</sup>

This code not only shows that polygamy was common among the Hebrew people, it also shows that there is a significant order in polygamy.

### Summary

In a general, introductory fashion, I have tried to examine what the Bible says concerning polygamy, and nowhere are any direct instructions given against its practice, save to the bishops and deacons in I Timothy 3:2, 12; and Titus 1:6. I have also tried to show God's treatment as described in biblical narratives of polygamists from the Old Testament times; and I have come to know that they were dealt with according to their faith in God, not on the basis of their marital status. I have likewise

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<sup>34</sup>M.D.W. Jeffreys, "Polygamy in the Christian Fold," Practical Anthropology 19 (March-April 1972) 83-4.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 85.

seen that the Christian ideals, such as agape and respect for the personhood of women coupled with their equality, can also operate in both monogamous and polygamous marriages. For these reasons, and many more, I can without any hesitation draw the following conclusions.

1. The Scripture does not give clear authority for formulating church laws to enforce monogamy on new converts and even church members. We are only following the church tradition, which may not be God's tradition, and we must be very careful that the church not be too zealous in doing God's work and thereby lose God's approval.

2. Acceptance by God is on the basis of faith alone, not on social organization. All through the Old and New Testaments we see God calling everyone to come and know Him and worship Him. The demands of Jesus for anyone who wants to follow Him are simple, "Whosoever shall come unto me I will in no wise cast out." The demands of the early apostles are similar to that of Jesus, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shall be saved, and thy house." Any addition to such demands is not from God, but from man. We must remember that it is not the church that saves, but Jesus Christ who is the head of His church.

3. Plural marriages do not necessarily contravene Scripture. Those who practice it may not meet the ideals of such marriages. Thus the church's demands should not rest on the system, but on its people. A shift of blame is therefore imperative.

4. Monogamy, as introduced to the Nigerians, is definitely a Western cultural norm and not necessarily a Christian ideal. To make monogamy the criterion for Christian discipleship is to make culture more important than faith in Jesus Christ. The church should not make the same

mistakes as the zealous Jewish Christians who wanted circumcision a must for Gentile converts.

5. Let the church preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, rather than preach culture. Christianity is a religion of love, not of cruelty, as has been projected on many polygamous wives and children. Christianity is not a religion of works alone but a religion of grace. "It is by grace that we are saved not of works lest anyman should boast."

6. Let the church have faith enough to know that God is able to accomplish His will on the matter of polygamous converts. If God can truly save them from worshipping the creation rather than the creator, can He not also save them from such things as polygamy, if polygamy is contrary to His calling? The church cannot and must not try to fight God's battle. "God's ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts than our thoughts."

7. It is wrong to equate polygamy with adultery. Nowhere in the Bible is polygamy treated as adultery. In the Old Testament adultery was severely condemned, and various penalties were given for such crime. Even unfair and sinful practices within polygamous marriages were discouraged (c. Lev. 20:10; 18:18; Deut. 22:23; 21:15-17; Ex. 22:16). Therefore in any church that sees baptism as the forgiveness of sins and giving eternal salvation to all who believe, or that sees baptism only as a declaration of one's faith in Jesus Christ, polygamists should not be exempted from baptism just because they are polygamists.

## CHAPTER III

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

Robert Horan, in trying to give a few preliminary observations on polygamy for a Western audience, has mentioned four important views of polygamy that need to be brought into the right perspective. The first observation is that polygamy is scarcely a question of "prurient interest." Sex, according to Horan, is the least reason for the practice of polygamy because "Sex is obtainable more readily outside of a marriage than through a lifetime commitment."<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, Horan pointed out that polygamy and low status of women are not all that clearly connected as such. In many cases, it is the first wife who tells her husband to get a second wife<sup>2</sup> as shall be discussed shortly in this chapter.

Thirdly, polygamy (like monogamy) takes a variety of forms, and may well be more successful in one society than in another—or less. Polygamy has social and economic implications for the broader society, and tends to share in the good and bad fortune of the larger society in many ways.<sup>3</sup>

Fourthly, it will be wrong for one to say unequivocally that polygamy is dying. In a few areas, it appears to be on the increase for demographical reasons<sup>4</sup> such as religion, education, economy and mortality

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Horan, "Polygamy Comes Home to Roost," Missiology 4 (1976) 445. See also Eugene A. Nida, Customs and Cultures (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954) 105.

<sup>2</sup>Horan, 445.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 446.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

rate.

One must be careful in making a sweeping statement that polygamy cannot work in any given society. Polygamy has been in existence for ages, and it still exists today among many tribes and cultures. In fact monogamous marriages seem not to be working in the West today since statistical data produced by Matthew McKay and some other writers shows that "The average marriage in the United States now lasts for 6.8 years, and the divorce rate has soared to fifty percent."<sup>5</sup>

#### Reasons Why Polygamy Is Practiced Among Nigerian People

There are many genuine reasons why Nigerians practice polygamy, as mentioned in chapter one. The major reason is that it is still legal to be a polygamist under the Customary Marriage Law and the Muslim Marriage Law both of which are part of the Nigerian laws of marriages discussed in chapter one. Other factors that are responsible for the polygamous practice are of paramount importance for our discussion. The order of my presentation of these factors has nothing to do with the order of importance. However, they represent some of the functions of polygamous marriages in Nigeria in the past, as well as the present.

1. Among the many gods that are worshipped by the heathens, the gods of fertility are of greater importance. Men and women have the desire to procreate for the stability of the family, clan, community and the nation as a whole. Where barrenness occurs in a family, help is generally sought; and the woman is usually blamed. It is only recently

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<sup>5</sup>Matthew McKay, Peter D. Rogers, Joan Blades, and Richard Gosse, The Divorce Book (Oakland: New Harbinger, 1984) 6.

that science has proved that the lack of children in a family may be due to the husband's sterility and not necessarily the wife's. Many Nigerian people still believe that much of the cause for barrenness is from the woman. Therefore, if no solution for the barrenness in a family is found, the man usually marries another wife. Efforts to beget a child may push a man to marry as many wives as are available.

I believe strongly that the church's view is not too different from the heathen view of marriage, in the sense that the major reason Nigerian churches give for marriage is the puritan view—for procreation. If this view still persists, what does the church expect the couple whose marriage has not been blessed with children to do? Does it expect them to view their barrenness as a cross they must carry throughout their lifetime? Or should they see their marriage as a union not approved by God and therefore make divorce their solution?

As discussed in the last chapter, the Bible is more in support of the pagan's view than that of the church's. Many biblical characters became polygamists, due to barrenness. Thus caution must be taken in dismissing barrenness as a lame excuse for polygamy.

2. In line with the desire to have many children is the fact that in ancient times the survival rate of children was very low, due to poor medical facilities. High child mortality is still plaguing many parts of Nigeria today, since there are not many doctors and nurses in the country. The easy solution to this unpredictable death of children is to have as many children as possible and hope that few or many will survive to adulthood.

3. Nigerians care very much about who their heir will be. In

a patriarchal system such as Nigeria, a male child is naturally preferred. When a woman continues to give birth to only female children, her husband generally seeks another wife to try for a male child. Female children are cherished, too, but they are definitely not as cherished as male children to many families. One of the reasons is that female children will soon mature, get married and leave their parents for their husbands' homes, thereby becoming additions to their husband's houses, but deductions to their parents' homes. Helene Chojnacka sees this as one of the reasons for dowry payments since it affects the economy of the girls' parents negatively.<sup>6</sup>

4. Tribal wars were frequent in ancient times, and wars were naturally seen as the men's job. If many lives were lost, there was bound to be a ratio gap between women and men. Where women surpass the number of men in the community, polygamy is used as a solution to cater to the excess of women without husbands. At the same time, with such loss in battle, the community has to find ways of replenishing the land with offspring. Since a man is capable of impregnating more than one woman in a short period, to marry more women for the purpose of childbearing is considered a civic duty. Women prefer being married to a married man to being single, not because they cannot support themselves, as John H. Chamberlayne suggested,<sup>7</sup> but because marriage is considered to be a respectable union among the Nigerians.

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<sup>6</sup>Helena Chojnacka, "Polygamy and the Rate of Population Growth," Research Bulletin, No. 5 (1978)

<sup>7</sup>John H. Chamberlayne, "The Family in Islam," Numen 15 (May 1986) 130.



The straightforward condemnation of the above reason for polygamy is that there are no more tribal wars, and Nigeria is experiencing a population explosion already. As true as this may be, there is still a craving on the part of Nigerian women to get married and bear children of their own. As to the ratio gap, no matter how insignificant that may be, it is obvious that some men cannot afford to take care of themselves, much less another mouth. It would also be foolish on the part of some women to marry a poverty-stricken person, when there is a wide opportunity for them to marry wealthy men. I am persuaded that Nigerian women who are strong protagonists of polygamy do so because polygamy offers them an opportunity to marry the man of their dreams.

5. Agrarian life was once very common among Nigerian people. Yet it was done with crude tools that needed manual labor. The more hands one gets the bigger one's farm land would be and the greater the harvest. To have a large harvest meant to have a lot of money, and a lot of money naturally leads to greater prestige and honor. It was easier to achieve this status through a larger family. To secure such prestige and honor, many farmers resorted to polygamy, so that more wives and more children could be used in their farm land. Thus, economically, polygamy was favored.

Kimball Young did a general study on the economic success of the polygamous families in Utah, and her record showed that over one-half of the polygamists fall in the wealthy or above average ranks, one-third in the medium or average, while only one-sixth are in the below average and boarderline poverty group. This data shows that there is a positive

correlation between plural marriage and higher economic status.<sup>8</sup>

Some scholars like Domus have expressed their view of polygamy as cheap labor as "one of the worst forms of capitalism when the rich enjoy life and satisfy their caprices, and the poor are left aside to starve."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, some have said that the use of women to promote men's economy, under the camouflage of wives, depicts a serious form of exploitation of women. The only correction I wish to make here is that everybody in the family benefits from the labor put in; and the farm is seen as the family's farm, not necessarily the husband's. This is different from what used to happen in the West when slaves were used, and yet these slaves had no claim to the fruit of their labor.

6. From the time of pregnancy to the time of weaning of the child, Nigerians have a taboo against the husband and wife having sexual intercourse with each other. The mother-to-be is generally looked upon as someone having no desire for sexual acts, because nature has made it so for that period. But the man is still active and craving for the release of his sexual urge. In order to avoid several temptations such as raping his wife or committing adultery with one of the wives of his relatives, or going out to the prostitutes where venereal diseases could be contracted, another wife is usually sought as a solution to these and many other temptations.

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<sup>8</sup>Kimball Young, Isn't One Wife Enough? (New York, Holt, 1954) 57. See also Nida, 105.

<sup>9</sup>Domas (pseud.), "An African Problem: Polygamy," AFER 25 (April 1983) 125.

Medical facts have proved that sexual relationships between husband and wife during pregnancy are safe at some periods, but the safe periods of each pregnant woman differ, and even the condition of the pregnancy must be properly checked by the physician to determine the safe periods. In this case, despite the lack of medical experience of the Nigerian people, the taboo has served a good purpose.

Also, it is not save for the new mother to have sexual dealings with her husband during nursing, to safeguard against early pregnancy.

7. Household duties are sometimes tedious and unaccomplishable. Since household duties are mostly women's duties, such responsibilities tend to be too much for one person to manage. This is truer if a man is very rich and a huge mansion is to be kept clean everyday. In such cases, the wife usually complains to the husband of her tiredness and her extra effort to satisfy him domestically and sexually. It is the wife who will then put pressure on the husband to look for a second wife, or she will find one for him.

From the Western perspective, the above will seem like a silly and unwarranted reason for polygamy to happen. But when viewed from the angle of acute shortage of labor, due to a lack of interest of many Nigerian people to become servants (mostly because of dignity and pride), such criticisms will be minimized. In any case, polygamy gives room for division of labor to enhance good health, happiness, and longevity.

8. Levirate rules usually cause people to be polygamous. The slight difference between the Nigerian levirate rite and the biblical type is that in Nigeria it does not matter whether the widow or widows of the deceased have children for him or not. From the beginning, the woman

is married to the family of her husband and not to her husband per se, though the obligation of sexual union is limited to the husband alone. At the death of the husband, the widows have the choice to remain with the family of their late husband or seek marriage outside their husband's clan. Many widows prefer staying with the husband's family to being married elsewhere, because of their children. Children, due to the patrilinear system in Nigeria, belong to the husband. The wife is seldom granted the custody of the children, except the suckling, who will be released to the mother temporarily until the child has been weaned. But as long as the widows agree to be given to members of their late husband as wives, they still have claims to their children. Thus polygamy, in this sense, enables mothers and children to be together, even after the death of their husbands and fathers.

9. Polygamy may occur through alliance with a king. In order to make and keep peace between one tribe and another, the weaker tribe usually makes an alliance with the stronger tribe by sending a princess to the stronger king or leader of the army. A strong king may then be given wives as gifts or bribes, to limit the scope of his conquest. Some scholars hold that this is how Solomon acquired many wives. They were given to him through alliances made with him by the neighboring kings.<sup>10</sup>

The position today has turned from alliance to avoid wars to that of keeping friendship between one king and the other. Through inter-tribal marriages, oneness has been realized.

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<sup>10</sup>David Ben-Gurion, The Jews in Their Land (London: Aldus, 1966) 55.

### Structure

The structure of a polygamous home is much the same in many areas as that of a monogamous family. It is obvious that in a patriarchal community the husband is the head of the family, and honor and respect must be accorded him. The husband is the boss, because he is the bread winner, the overseer, the protector, the father of all the children, the counselor, and much more. Without him the family could never have existed as a family.

Leyser, a German philosopher, views the relationship of men and women as that of a masters-servants analogy.<sup>11</sup> This is not necessarily true in polygamous homes. Though the husband has the final word in most matters, the wives are given opportunities to make suggestions on most matters affecting the family as a whole. If the old adage is true that "There can never be two captains in a ship else the ship will sink," it is more true in a polygamous marriage. Where there is laxity on the part of the husband, there is bound to be chaos in the home.

There must be more than one wife in a family for that family to be called polygamous. The ranking of these wives is judged according to the order in which they were married by their husband. The first wife is seen as the next in rank to the husband. She is seen as the "chief wife," that is, "Iya'le" in the Yoruba language. This position is never allotted by the age of the wives. The first wife is regarded as the "chief wife," not because she is the only legal wife as Parrinder

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<sup>11</sup> John Cairncross, After Polygamy Was Made a Sin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) 80.

concluded.<sup>12</sup> Rather, all the wives are legally married; but by the virtue of the fact that all other wives met her at home she automatically becomes their leader. All other wives are expected to give her due respect, though much less than what will be allotted to their husband.

The chief wife is the coordinator of the household. She sees to the good keeping of the house, and on her lies the responsibility for orderliness in the family. In other words, she is the "eye" of their husband, and when the husband is not around she is his deputy until his return. The leadership of the first wife is not dictatorial, but as a counselor who makes suggestions to her counselees.

The ranking becomes very low when it comes to the last wife. The last wife is almost the servant of all. She is referred to as the "little wife." The only thing she has in her favor more than any other wife in the family is the new and strong affection of their husband, at least for the time being.

The children in the polygamous home are treated like that of a monogamous home. Seniority is according to age. It does not matter whether or not the first born is a girl or a boy, except on issues concerning inheritance. It also does not matter whether the first child belongs to the first wife or the last wife. The first born child in the family is looked upon as the eldest child.

It is possible in polygamous homes for two or more wives to be pregnant at the same period. When this happens, who ever is born first,

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<sup>12</sup>Geoffrey Parrinder, The Bible and Polygamy (London: S.P.C.K., 1950) 14.

whether in a course of minutes or hours before the other, is regarded as the big brother or sister of the other child or children of the other pregnant wife.

There is great order in polygamous homes, unlike what Western people might expect. Everybody knows his or her position in the family; yet no one can abuse the privileges of that position, except the husband occasionally. As realistic people must expect, not every polygamous marriage works out right, just as some monogamous marriages end in divorce, due to lack of order, respect, and love. Some people in the West criticize polygamy because they cannot imagine what their feelings would be like as women living under the same roof with a common husband. The fact is, living with a common husband is not strange and unrealistic among those who practice polygamy. Wives under polygamy have come to see nothing wrong in their sharing the same husband, because it is a common practice in the society. What is considered right or wrong is determined mainly by the community one lives in and associates with.

#### Advantages of Polygamy

Many advantages of polygamy have been given but there are some social evils which polygamy prevents that are not directly related to the functions of polygamy.

Some Western scholars have termed polygamy as a bold way of expressing adultery. To such people a definition of marriage is necessary.

Muhammad Abdul-Rauf defined marriage as:

A solemn contractual agreement between an eligible male and an eligible female, concluded in the presence of witnesses, whereby they

become acknowledged as husband and wife: Thus a union, short or long, between two persons of the same sex, is not a marriage but an ugly homosexuality. An agreement between a number of men and a number of women to live together sharing communally their sexual services, is not a marriage but immoral and asocial promiscuity. A liaison between a marriageable couple without a duly witnessed contract is adulterous.<sup>13</sup>

To degrade polygamous marriages to the level of adultery is to judge what is accepted by another culture by the standard of one's own culture, which is determined to be the absolute culture. This is called ethnocentrism. Nobody is innocent of ethnocentric practices; the only difference is the degree of ethnocentrism.

Polygamy reduces the rate of sexual promiscuity, because it provides the man who, according to Thielicke, is "naturally polygamous"<sup>14</sup> with socially approved means of satisfying his sexual gratification with the opposite sex. Only a sex maniac will go beyond what is available to him in his polygamous home for the release of his sexual passions.

Polygamy offers the opportunity for women to marry the man of their choice, without any barrier because of the man being married to another woman. The man does not have to divorce his present wife in order to marry another woman who has agreed to marry him, as is commonly the case in the monogamous system.

Studies have shown that polygamous marriages cost less to run than monogamous ones, and many men even become richer when they enter

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<sup>13</sup> Muhammed Abdul-Rauf, The Islamic View of Women and the Family (New York: Speller, 1977) 39.

<sup>14</sup> Helmut Thielicke, The Ethics of Sex (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 84ff, 93.



into polygamous marriages.<sup>15</sup> This is probably because where there is combined effort toward a goal, the success is always greater than what is done on an individual basis. In many polygamous homes, the wives do not depend on their husbands to provide everything for them and their children. The competition to look their best and to make their personal children become independent in the future is so great that polygamous wives would hardly be content with their husband's financial support. The majority of these wives engage in petty trading, which may develop into large-scale enterprises. Through this, what would have been a heavy burden on the husband has been shared among the wives, due to what can be called a "healthy competition." The husband is left to take care of the basic necessities of the family, such as household expenses, bills, and other things that affect the family as a whole.

#### Disadvantages of Polygamy

I have said in the introductory part of this paper that what we can term to be disadvantageous in a given family may not appear to be so in others. I must also point out that the fact that some polygamous marriages do not work does not mean that the system is at fault. Rather, the fault may be due to the individuals in the system. The same is true about monogamy. Increase in the divorce rate in monogamous marriages does not mean that marriage in itself is bad. Rather, the fault is basically in the individuals whose marriages end in divorce. This is the reason why we have marriage counselors who try to point out the ways of

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<sup>15</sup>Cairncross, 76.

making marriages work better for the benefit of those involved.

I have tried to single out some problems which are more frequently seen in polygamous homes than in monogamous homes. In other words, it is not that these problems do not exist in monogamous homes, but the degree to which they exist in polygamous homes is so pronounced that caution must be taken before one enters into a polygamous marriage. The advice of a polygamous wife to a woman about to be married into a polygamous family that "Polygamy is not a thing you go into once and have it over; it is something that lasts everyday of your life and you have it always to contend with,"<sup>16</sup> should be well taken by any person who wishes to enter into polygamy.

The first major problem in many polygamous marriages is jealousy. Some wives feel neglected by their husband spending too much time with his favorite wife. Where jealousy occurs, there is bound to be gossip that is intentionally directed to hurt the feelings of the favorite wife. I would categorize the relationship of Leah and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob, under this problem.

Jealousy can lead to hatred. Hate and love can exist in a polygamous home at the same time, when there are more than two wives in the home. Once a scape goat has been found among the wives, other wives usually team up against the domineering wife. The other wives will, for the period when they have a common enemy, become closely attached and their friendship usually surpasses the friendship that exists between them

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<sup>16</sup>Young, 191.

and their husband. Any good thing that comes their way, like the bearing of children, is seen as God's vengeance against the hated wife; and the meaning read into such happenings is usually exaggerated. This is why Leah gave her children names that imply God's intervention for the ill-treatment she had received from Jacob because of Rachel. Leah's first child was named Reuben, which means "Surely God has looked upon my affliction." Simeon means "Because I was hated, God has therefore given me a son." Judah means "Now will I praise the Lord."

Unhealthy competition is common in polygamous homes. When this happens, the husband always gets the best of everything in polygamy. Each wife will like to cook her husband the best dish, satisfy him with whatever he asks for, especially sex. Each wife wants the attention of the husband to be directed toward her. In most cases such competition is always accompanied with extravagancy. Every wife wants to outdo the other both at home and in the community. The best of clothes will be worn; they become extra loving and generous to outsiders, as if they are seeking the approval, praise and sympathy.

Sadness is another problem that needs to be mentioned. While some of the above problems may not directly affect the children, sadness, like joy or happiness, does affect the children. It is not surprising at all for Ann Eliza Young to notice the absence of happiness in her childhood, as she later wrote:

I often wonder if there is a child...born under the blight of polygamy, who knows what is is to have a happy, joyous childhood, rendered more happy and more joyous by the smiling, calm content of the mother, in whose arms its tiny infant form lies cradled. I fear the cases are so rare as happy women are. True, childhood always has a certain care-less happiness of its own, that even the saddest surroundings cannot

wholly repress; but even this happiness is embittered by the tearful eyes that gaze into trustful baby ones, and the lips that quiver with pain, as they try to smile back into laughing baby faces.<sup>17</sup>

The worst thing about sadness in polygamous homes is that many wives are sad on joyous occasions, and they are happy on sad occasions when such occasions relate to the other wife.

Another problem is suspicion. Incidents that always bring suspicions are theft, food poisoning, tattling, and the like. Suspicion of tattling and theft are not as that of food poisoning, no matter how mild the food poison may be. Thus polygamy does not tend to make one woman just towards her co-wives.

Polygamy may also keep the husband from showing affection toward any of his wives before the other wives and the public at large. The consequence is always severe on the wife to whom affection is shown, by her becoming the object of malice for the other wives.

Studies have shown that many husbands prefer to see that their wives are divided, because the husbands enjoy the devotions of the wives as they seek their husband's attention.

The unfortunate situation in many polygamous homes is that their children are properly indoctrinated to hate and seek revenge among their half brothers and sisters. An example from the Bible is the case of Absalom and Ammon, David's sons, when Absalom planned and killed Ammon, his half brother, for raping Absalom's full sister, Tamar.

The situation in the above paragraph points out another vital issue in polygamy. In most cases, all the children of all the wives do

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<sup>17</sup> Ann Eliza Young, Wife No. 19 (New York: Arnos Press, 1972) 98.

not relate together as one family, in reality. The fact that they belong to different mothers generally creates a gap in the degree of intimacy that should exist between brothers and sisters. Children of different mothers seem to mind their own business when one of them should be corrected or disciplined.

It is very common to find divisions and unfriendliness in a polygamous system. The polygamous family may live together in a big mansion, but they may not have anything to do with each other. Without exaggerating, some next door neighbors are friendlier to each other than some wives and their children in a polygamous home.

Some polygamous fathers, in order to be fair to all their wives, usually decide to send only one child of each wife to college. This means that once a child has been sent to college, the other children from the same mother are either neglected or left to the capability of their mother to send them to college, no matter how ingenious they might be.

#### Summary

Some of the functions of polygamy may now be seen as obsolete, but some of them still serve the basic needs that cause many Nigerians to enter into polygamy. It does not even matter whether any of the functions of polygamy stated in this chapter have to do with one's desire for a polygamous marriage, since marriages under the Customary and Muslim Laws in Nigeria approve of polygamy without asking for reasons.

Eugene Hillman has rightly suggested that no one can truly judge and categorize other cultures as low and immoral by the standard of one's

own culture, because there is no culture that can be labelled The Culture. It is certain that all systems have their own advantages and disadvantages.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, having mentioned the above disadvantages of polygamy, care must be taken by anybody who wishes to agree with the missionaries that it is proper to abolish polygamy or force any polygamous convert to divorce his wives and marry one.

Abolition of polygamy is not the solution here; what polygamous families need is adequate, unbiased marriage counseling.<sup>19</sup> The counseling should be different from that used for a monogamous marriage, because the structure of polygamy is far different from monogamy. In polygamy, several wives and a husband from different backgrounds are to be considered by the counselor, not just one wife and one husband.

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<sup>18</sup>Eugene Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered (New York: Orbis, 1975) 57ff.

<sup>19</sup>Musa Dimka Gotom, "Towards an Indigenous Model for Pastoral Counseling and Care Based on Some Socio-cultural Anthropological and Theological presuppositions of Certain Nigerian People" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, School of Theology at Claremont, 1975) 275-6.

## CHAPTER IV

## PROBLEM RESOLUTION

I have, from the beginning, argued against the methods the missionaries used to exterminate polygamy from the church in Nigeria and Africa at large. We can see that polygamy was despised by the Nigerian converts, because they were carefully and forcefully indoctrinated by the Western missionaries who saw themselves as the shephards and Africans as the sheep. In fact, many Nigerian converts were made to think that they have to be Westernized before they can be fully accepted by the Christ that was preached to them by the missionaries. Until the present, some Nigerians believed that the color "white" is the "sacred" color and "black" stands for "evil" and "sin." Whatever the missionaries said was held as the "sacred truth." No explanation was asked for, and none was given. As Bankole Timothy noted, drums were forbidden in worship services by the missionary churches, because the missionaries perceived that drums were originally used for pagan worship; yet musical instruments used in the Western night clubs were freely used in the Western churches.<sup>1</sup> Many more things were ignorantly adhered to by the Nigerians, just because the missionaries said so. Thus, Baeta is right when he said that:

Missionaries were by no means merely evangelists and prophets, they were also leaders to whom the African communities looked for introduction to the highly complex new ways of life busting in through the

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<sup>1</sup>Bankole Timothy, Missionary Shephards and African Sheep (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1971) 14ff. See also Lawrence Nya Kwiawon, "Impact of the African Tradition on Christianity in Africa Through the Independent Church Movements" (Unpublished D.Min. project, School of Theology at Claremont, 1975) 82-90.

other channels of government and trade. The mission station was not merely a base for teaching the Christian discipline and manner of living and for propagating the faith; it was also a pocket of this new invading civilization, displaying and mediating a wide range of its teaching.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously the missionaries were the "lords" at one time in Africa. Now that the dogmatic Western missionary era is gone it is time that the Nigerian missionary churches consider the following recommendations as a solution to the problem of polygamy.

#### Recommendations

1. The Nigerian missionary churches ought to understand that polygamy is not a sin, because there is no evidence in the Bible that polygamy is condemned. Therefore, monogamy, as introduced to the Nigerian Christians, is an imposition of the Western culture on the Nigerian Christian tradition. We do not have to be Westernized in order to be true Christians.

2. The Nigerian missionary churches ought to understand that Christianity and cultures are two difference entities.<sup>3</sup> If the Nigerian Protestant missionary churches want Africans to abide by the principle of monogamy, it must now be done in a democratic manner, whereby the church will discuss the issue and it will be properly voted on.

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<sup>2</sup>C.G. Baeta, Christianity in Tropical Africa (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 15. See also Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, The Origins and Development of African Theology (New York: Orbis, 1985) 31.

<sup>3</sup>Louis J. Luzbetak, The Church and Cultures (Techny: Divine Word, 1963) 269.



3. The Nigerian missionary church ought to understand that the role of the church is not to add more burdens to the already existing burdens of a new convert. Rather, the church's role is to lighten the burdens of a convert and bring meaning to the once meaningless life of the convert. This can be done through counselling which would make Christian polygamous marriages more enriching than the non-Christian ones.

4. The missionary churches ought to understand that with every polygamous husband denied membership in the church, loss of many lives to Christ within the polygamous household may result. It is very easy for the husband to persuade his wives and children to go to church with him whereby they too can have the opportunity of hearing the gospel preached to them. On the other hand, it is difficult for one wife in a polygamous home to reject the husband's faith without any resistance from the husband. In short, when the husband is won to Christ, there is every likelihood that the whole family will be won to Christ. A perfect example for this move is found in Acts 16:23-34. Here, the jailer who was converted by Paul and Silas, made his home available to Paul and Silas and his whole household was saved by believing in God.

5. The missionary churches ought to understand that it takes faith in Christ alone to become a Christian. As Christians no one is perfect. We are all sinners saved by grace. If polygamy is viewed by the church as sinful, that does not necessitate the abandonment of polygamists from the church. Instead it only challenges the church to work patiently with the polygamist to make him know where he has missed the mark of the Christian ideal of marriage. If the church insists on divorce of other wives as the only solution, the church must understand that

restitution cannot be made for everything that one has done wrong, especially when it involves sexual relationships.

6. Conversion, as C. W. Brister stated, "is to be viewed dynamically in terms of the individual's spiritual sensitivity, emotional maturity, and sense of personal responsibility to God in Christ."<sup>4</sup> Conversion is God's gracious gift, rather than an achievement of an individual or a group. Therefore, the Nigerian missionary churches must not assume God's place, especially when it comes to the conversion of any polygamist whom God loves and has called into his flock, despite his marital status.

7. The Nigerian missionary church ought to give the Holy Spirit the chance of convincing the polygamist of his "sinful" status. After all, we believe and claim that the Holy Spirit is at work among the people of God. Let it be known that Christ, who is the head of His church, is not the author of confusion, which we now face in the handling of our polygamous converts.

8. Like Martin Luther, the reformer, I do not condemn polygamy as a sinful form of marriage, since the Bible, our authority, does not directly condemn its practice. However, I do not recommend polygamy for the Christian, excluding polygamous converts, on the basis that if its practice will make some brethren stumble let it be discontinued because each Christian must be his brother's keeper.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>C.W. Brister, Pastoral Care in the Church (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 209.

<sup>5</sup>Leo Miller, John Milton Among the Polygamophiles (New York: Loewenthal Press, 1974) 15.

9. Abolition of polygamy may not work in Africa. If it can work, time must be given. Those Christian converts who are presently polygamously married should be exempted from the ban, in order not to cause more problems for the wives who would have been pushed out by their polygamous husbands and the children who will continually see themselves as bastards.

10. To the Nigerian missionary churches, I plead in accordance with what is written in Acts 5:38-39:

And so in this present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

This was Gamaliel's advice to the Sanhedrin during the early Christian era, and I believe that the passage is relevant to the issue of the church and polygamy in the present, as well.

### Conclusion

I have tried to find out what the Scriptures say about polygamy, which has been overwhelmingly rejected by the Western missionaries and the Nigerian missionary churches. I can categorically say that the Bible does not condemn polygamy, and neither did God nor Jesus Christ give any laws to abolish polygamy among His people or followers. Therefore, it is the church tradition that has been strictly followed for the ban on polygamy in the church.

Historically, Nigerians were familiar with monogamy. However, the idea that polygamy was against God's plan for marriage, and monogamy was the ideal, was introduced by the Western missionaries. I believe the

missionaries and the Nigerian missionary churches have made a mistake in trying to change the life-style of their polygamous converts overnight. The church should not have expected or forced a marriage that has lasted for many years to end abruptly because the husband has accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

As much as I am not in favor of polygamy, both in the church and the society at large, because it creates more problems within the household than monogamy, I believe that the mandate to divorce as a prior requirement for church membership on the polygamous converts is not the right solution to the problem of polygamy in the Nigerian missionary churches. They should exempt polygamous converts from the monogamy requirement for church membership for the following reasons:

1. I recognize that the church has the right to stipulate new rules for its church membership despite the fact that such rules may lack direct biblical support. But as I have argued in chapter two of this paper, divorce is clearly stated in the Bible to be against God's plan for marriage. Therefore, while the church sees polygamy as morally wrong, the wrongness of divorce must not be minimized either. Since polygamy is a church rule, it must then be seen as a lesser evil to divorce.

2. It may be true that the church has not denied the polygamist his salvation in Jesus Christ by preaching to him. But salvation without fellowship can lead to backsliding. Every Christian needs the support of other Christians in order to grow toward Christian maturity. If the church insists that polygamous converts must divorce their extra wives, my view is that the church should stop witnessing to any known polygamist

rather than giving him opportunity to become a Christian without a church, which makes him an outcast within the household of God. Or, let the church first make a monogamist out of the polygamist, before preaching Christ to him. The church must know that there is high risk involved for a pagan or a Muslim to change his religion to Christianity. Some of these converts may be rejected by their blood relatives for becoming Christians. It is, therefore, highly disappointing for a polygamous convert to be rejected again by the church, which should provide Christian support at such a crucial time in his life.

3. If the Nigerian missionary churches see everything wrong with polygamy, despite the fact that the system is socially recognized and lacks any biblical condemnation, they should also think about their acceptance of adulterers, fornicators, murderers, liars, et cetera, on the basis of faith in Christ alone. These people have done something wrong; yet it is after their acceptance that they are expected to conform to Christian principles. There is no justifiable reason, then why polygamists should be punished for their innocence.

4. While some Christians who are not allowed to practice polygamy may see the acceptance of polygamous converts into the church as creating a double standard, these Christians must know that the polygamous converts contracted their marriage in a legal, moral manner, though such marriages would have been illegal and immoral under the Christian marriage law as discussed in chapter one.

In order to change a polygamist slowly and compassionately to a monogamist, the church may insist that the polygamous convert should not

marry any wife in addition to the ones he presently has. Likewise, if the polygamist should lose any of his wives by divorce or death, the church may discourage his remarrying, if he still has one wife. Thus, while a polygamist may be fully accepted into the church, the monogamous ideal of the Nigerian missionary churches can be made binding on him for the future. The only difference is the procedure for achieving the monogamous standard.

There is no biblical reason why polygamous converts should be denied baptism, church membership, and the Lord's Supper. The adaptation of the Western cultural norms for marriage by the Nigerian missionary churches caused such denials. But Christianity is not culture-bound.

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